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FRESHMAN COMPOSITION--WHEN DO WE SAY WE'VE DONE THE JOB.

BY- LAMBERTS, J.J.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENG.,CHAMPAIGN,ILL

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COMPOSITION TEACHERS TOO OFTEN TEACH AS IF MOST OF THE STUDENTS WILL BECOME ENGLISH MAJORS. MANY TEACHERS ALSO GIVE POOR, UNDIRECTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSUME, AFTER CORRECTING THE PAPERS, THAT THEIR JOB IS ACCOMPLISHED. BECAUSE STUDENTS DO NOT LEARN TO WRITE BY THIS METHOD, THE COMPOSITION COURSE SHOULD BE CUT DOWN TO A FEW BASIC ESSENTIALS. THE STUDENT SHOULD BE MADE TO FEEL RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERY WORD HE WRITES, AND TO ASSUME THAT HE IS ON HIS OWN, FOR THIS IS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO LEARN TO WRITE. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION," VOLUME 18, NUMBER 5, DECEMBER 1967, PAGES 232-235. (BN)

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Freshman Composition: When Do We Say We've Done the Job?

J. J. LAMBERTS

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MANY YEARS AGO I was a private first class in the Army Air Force. As the result of some devious paper work I found myself assigned to Sixth Air Force headquarters located in the Panama Canal Zone. Because my records indicated that I had had some civilian experience in journalism, I was given the responsibility of editing the official magazine of the Sixth Air Force, a rather glossy affair with a good deal of photography and art work. It appeared once a month, or as often as we could wangle the necessary paper from supply.

Presiding over this and associated enterprises was a young lieutenant endowed with boundless energy and boundless ambition. I had been editor for six or eight weeks when he stopped at my desk to pay what he evidently regarded as a high compliment:

"You certainly write good copy."

"Thank you, sir."

"I never have to do anything to it."

"What made you think you should?"

"Well, I always had to go over everything Sam wrote."

Sam had been my immediate predecessor as editor and I respected him. He was then, and still is, a competent craftsman and a good reporter. And so this exchange between the lieutenant and myself puzzled me for a long time. Only much later did it dawn on me that reporting had been Sam's assignment, first and last. He could move in on a story, get the details, and set it down on paper before most of us had left the pencil sharpener. But everything Sam wrote was subject to the blue-pencil and paste-pot of his editor. He took it for granted that he would be edited. I had done a little work on dailies but most of my work had been with a couple of the better weekly papers in Michigan. There I had been editor and whatever left my desk I expected to see in print exactly the way I had written it.

Perhaps all of this sounds two thousand miles and twenty years distant from our current problems in student writing. It seems to me there are some basic similarities. Sam, you see, could always count on having someone to pick up after him or to cover up his worst blunders. There was no such protection for me. Every Thursday morning as the city and rural mail carriers delivered the papers in the swift completion of their appointed rounds I felt myself once again "naked to mine enemies." If I had put down the wrong date for the PTA or had a bride inaccurately attired or had landed the wrong miscreant in the county jail, I was the person who bore the blame. Quickly I learned what Francis Bacon meant when he said, "Writing [maketh] an exact man."

In our eagerness to help our students we are often much too kind to them. The mischief begins in high school and even earlier than that. Teachers complain again and again that they have countless papers to take home and "correct." That is exactly the word they use, and they mean it. They suppose that they need to edit the papers for the youngsters. That is preposterous.

Editing even one is far too many. Only the elect angels have any comprehension of the number of doctoral dissertations that are substantially rewritten by a hapless candidate's chairman, who by that act commits his charge to a perpetual "Sam-hood," fearful from this time forward to trust his own academic style to the hazards of the inbasket of a scholarly journal.

There is a problem here and it reduces itself to two simple questions. The first is: where do we expect to be when we have finished? And the second is: How will we know when we have arrived? This past semester my daughter decided to enroll in a course in computer programming. At the beginning of the term she and her classmates were told that they would be given six problems and that as soon as they had finished one they could start on the next one. They could go as fast as they liked. She resolved to finish early, and she did. My imagination will not permit me to picture the English composition teacher who is so certain of himself that he allows a student out of his sight a single day before the course is officially ended. Does this mean that he feels he is imparting indispensable assistance to the student up to the very end of the course? Or does he perhaps realize that not much has happened and not much is likely to happen?

We assume that writing can be taught and to that end we engage legions of graduate teaching assistants. Although all three are art forms, we assume that it is easier to teach a young person how to glaze pottery or to play a Chopin waltz than it is to teach him to write. The reason is not that these subjects are in themselves easier, but that we have firm ideas about how a properly glazed pot will look and how a properly played composition will sound. I am not at all sure that we cannot do somewhat the same thing in writing. Unfortunately we entrust the teaching of this art to graduate students, the more ambitious of whom are laboring to desiccate their own styles so they will sound as lifeless as the scholarly journals.

I am becoming increasingly convinced that most of the difficulty rests on the most basic of all the enterprises in the teaching of writing, namely, the assignment. The experiments in chemistry are carefully planned and programmed; that is also true of mathematics. Many of the assignments I have seen given in English writing courses might be translated by the phrase: "Write at random." We give the assignments without conviction and somewhat less expectation that anything will happen; in fact, we are immediately diverted when the student submits an interesting paper on a completely different topic. By means of the assignment I am asking the student to do a specific thing. I want him to learn how to do it by actually doing it. He will not learn by reading about it or by listening to me talk about it. I have given him something to write and that is what he is to do. It may be a practical matter like writing a letter to a department head. I have read some of the letters graduate students have written to department heads and I wonder how many of them would be competent enough to teach this particular art form. It may be describing a commonplace household appliance as clearly and precisely and appealingly as the Montgomery Ward catalog does. That is also an art form. It may be arguing a point of view with some respect for the canons of logic. Such things are minimal skills. I regard them vastly more important than I do the ability to execute the proper form of a footnote or the ability to trace the etymology of a noun by means of the Oxford English Dictionary.

I am not suggesting that mastery of these three items will comprise a fully rounded course in student writing. On

the other hand, I would suppose that the list of essentials is shorter than we commonly imagine it to be. I am sure it can be more concrete. Students who learn these things can be counted on to handle other writing with greater certainty than can the nondescripts that we presently turn out by the hundreds of thousands.

My days on a weekly newspaper taught me to do some things with great skill and effectiveness. I could, for instance, describe a fire or automobile wreck or other calamity, realizing that my account might become part of a court record; I could also write the biography of a person, living or dead; I could also tell my readers what the city council and the county board of supervisors were up to. These three are sometimes called description, narration, and exposition. Most of the writing we do is merely embroidery on one or the other of them.

Before becoming a journalist I had completed two semesters of the conventional freshman composition course at a thoroughly respectable liberal arts college. My instructor was at the time head of the department of English. He talked much about dangling participles and sentence fragments and the acceptable form of the footnote. It was during the depression when I graduated and was glad for any kind of job, so I went to work for the publisher of a country weekly. He never mentioned participles or comma splices, and naturally we never used footnotes. He let me make mistakes and he permitted me to suffer embarrassment because of them. But after six months he loaded his wife and two daughters into the family automobile and drove across the United States to the Grand Canyon, leaving me in charge of his newspaper. He assumed, in other words, that I could write.

I have made this largely autobiographical because it points out what I regard as one of the fundamental fallacies of the writing program. We teach it as though every student were planning to take a degree in English. Those that will ultimately become our English teachers seldom anticipate their high calling when they are freshmen; usually they have set their hearts on becoming chemists or frogmen or airline stewardesses or archaeologists. Only one student that I can remember wanted right from the start to be an English teacher and I found it difficult to teach her anything so I gave her a C.

The fact that an instructor has had a course in the History of the English Language is not sufficient reason for him to incorporate it into a writing course, yet the writing course is commonly cluttered with this and kindred material. The freshman writing course is not a facts course; it is a writing course. The things a student really needs to know are really rather few. When I was a country editor I used to have a number of "correspondents," as we called them—housewives who reported what was happening in their neighborhoods. Many of them had never completed high school. I am sure not one of them had ever heard of a bibliography and if any of them saw a footnote I suppose she ignored it. But these housewives could put together declarative sentences that were clear and readable. They did not attempt to spell beyond their means. What they wrote they expected to see in print with little or no editorial embellishments. The most important aspect to all this is that these women assumed that they were on their own. That was how they learned to write.

It was not a difference in the amount of information that stood between these rural correspondents and the college students I encounter. The college students presumably know a great deal and have vast quantities available to them in the library. But they find it difficult to set down on paper what they know. No-

body has ever really trusted them with a sentence.

From time to time someone suggests that we set up a composition course for the non-specialists and teach some of the ordinary decencies of clear writing. This can be done. We should indicate what the limits of such a course are and the moment a student has mastered them he deserves to be given an A and turned loose on his own. As it stands now, what does he have to work for?

I would go so far as to eliminate from the course all but the basic business of writing, of learning to handle an assignment. Any teacher of another subject who wants to go beyond that may do so on his own. I have a couple of junior and senior level courses, for instance, in which I require term papers. To assume that the students know anything at all about making footnotes or compiling a bibliography is the height of folly, even though scarcely without exception each one of them has spent a semester in a course directed to these particular matters. I take it for granted that they know nothing about the subject, tell them the theory behind footnoting and bibliographing and show them where they can find directions to do either one. It takes half an hour of my time. I have about 120 students, and this is the equivalent of what five or six sections of freshman composition have spent a semester learning, evidently with zero carry-over. Our colleagues may not like what we are doing, but if they think footnoting and bibliographing are vital, let them teach those things. I should prefer a student who could write a clear sentence with conventional spelling and punctuation, who could join two ideas together with an appropriate connective, who could carry a single idea from an introduction to a conclusion.

I am not convinced that we need to scuttle the introductory writing course and by that action turn it over to the teachers in secondary school. The moment we do that the high school teacher will feel charged with a great sense of mission and in the realization that he has to "prepare students for college," he goes through the fol-de-rol of bibliographing and footnoting and all the rest. Then we will have 16 and 17 year olds beating out their brains trying to compare Spinoza and Descartes or tracing the economic significance of the Second Punic War.

I think we need simply serve notice on our colleagues in other departments —and, as a matter of fact, in our own— that we intend to continue teaching introductory composition, but that we are cutting it down to a small list of bare basics which the student is expected to master as part of his education. More than that, however, we want to get the student out on his own as quickly as possible. He needs to feel that he dares to trust himself to write an English sentence that says what he wants to say. He must have the assurance that his reader will comprehend what he has in mind and will respect his qualifications for saying what he has to say.

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